Platoons of Action: An Armor Task Force's Response to Full-Spectrum Operations in Iraq

by John P.J. DeRosa

What died on the battlefields of Iraq was the vision held by many of a homogenized army — one in which units would largely resemble one another. Instead, the Army of the future will require a large kit bag of capabilities that it can deploy and fit together, sometimes in the middle of battle, to meet the many exigencies of this new era in warfare.[1]

For decades, warfare experts have predicted that the nature of warfare will change in the 21st century. The nature of warfare has already changed dramatically. As the U.S. Army continues to move toward changes that will conceive, shape, test, and field an army prepared to meet the challenges of full-spectrum operations, Chief of Staff, Army (CSA) General Schoomaker asked, "I want to know if he [division commander] can turn his three brigades into five maneuver brigades, and if I provide the right equipment, could they be one and a half more lethal than before…"[2] Specifically, CSA Schoomaker asked for the best war-tested concepts of deploying and fighting, adding that proposals must be lethal, balanced, and modular. As the armor force is steeped in innovation and transformation, a parallel debate in *ARMOR*, raised the question, "Why not start with a combined-arms team at the platoon level and only scramble when necessary, rather than continually re-task organize? What follows are four different answers to the challenges of full-spectrum operations centered on platoon level "units of action."[3]

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield

On receipt of the mission, the S2 began a detailed terrain analysis of our proposed area of operation. Initial analysis showed a diverse mixture of terrain that would have varying impacts on maneuver operations. Task Force (TF) 1st Battalion, 77th (1-77) Armor, "Steel Tigers," was assigned a total area of over 1,000 square kilometers, and it was immediately apparent that company sectors would each require their own unique approach to task organization based on terrain. From the open desert area south of Highway 1, to the jungle-like vegetation of Al Zourr, and the confined streets of Balad, each company would have unique terrain challenges.

The one terrain feature that would have the most impact, regardless of company sector, was the canal system. The Balad area is very agrarian and an endless system of canals criss-cross the entire region. These canals vary widely in depth and width but are not fordable and can only be crossed at existing bridge sites. The small canal roads present an additional challenge to the maneuverability of armored vehicles. In most cases, they cannot support the weight or width of the M1 Abrams. The M2 is also constrained by these canal roads, although it does enjoy slightly more freedom of movement than the Abrams. Based on this analysis, the commander decided to weight his tracked assets onto the main supply routes/alternate supply routes and the open terrain south of Highway 1.

Operationally, Iraq is a complex environment of low-intensity conflict and political and economic reconstruction. Anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) tactics are low-level and fairly unsophisticated.[4] Their actions are usually limited to a single strike followed by an immediate withdrawal to avoid decisive engagements. The fights in Iraq are movements to contact against a relatively disorganized enemy force. Small ambushes against patrols and convoys are the preferred enemy tactic. Attacks occur in restrictive urban terrain in close proximity to businesses and homes; ambushes are initiated from orchards or dense agricultural terrain; improvised explosive devices (IED) are triggered along expanses of highways; and mortar or rocket attacks are constant.

The current operating environment (COE) requires tactical agility with emphasis on small-scale operations of infantry squads or tank sections actioning on contact. The porous nature of the COE allows AIF to become expert "exfiltrators," avoiding death or capture. Therefore, instant transition to pursuit is a necessity. More often than not, the pursuit is preceded by a transition from mounted to dismounted elements.

TF 1-77 Steel Tigers
Troop to Task (U.S.)

As of 24 Aug 04

Task/Location	Requirement (# Squads/Platoons)*	Frequency (Daily/Weekly)	Priority
Combat Patrol - LSAA Zone A - consisting of: Route Clearance NAI Overwatch Observation Posts React to Indirect Fire (as necessary) R&S vic LSA Anaconda	4 Platoons	Daily	High
Counter-Mortar Patrol – N. Balad – consisting of: Route Clearance NAI Overwatch Observation Posts Traffic Control Points React to Point of Origin (POO) (as necessary)	2 Platoons	Daily	High
Counter-Mortar Patrol – S. Balad – consisting of: Route Clearance—ASRs Linda & Amy NAI Overwatch Observation Posts Traffic Control Points React to POO (as necessary)	2 Platoons	Daily	High
Route Clearance – MSR TAMPA-ASR LINDA-ASR AMY-ASR PEGGY including: Observation Posts Traffic Control Points	3 Platoons	Daily	High
Combat Logistics Patrol, consisting of: Route Clearance	1 Platoon	1-2 times daily	High
QRF – FOB PALIWODA	1 Platoon	Daily	High
QRF – LSA ANACONDA	1 Platoon	Daily	High
EOD Escort	1 Platoon	As necessary	Medium
Force Protection – FOB PALIWODA	1 Platoon	Daily	High
Iraqi National Guard (ING) Training	3 Platoons	2-3 times weekly	High
Detainee Transfer to FOB Remagen	1 Platoon	1-2 times weekly	High
SOI Engagements including: City Council Meetings- Balad & Yethrib Police Station Visits	1 Platoon	3-4 times weekly	High
Iraqi Police Service (IPS) Training	1 Squad	2-3 times weekly	High
Fuel Escort to FOB Tinderbox	1 Platoon	1 weekly	High
Detention Center Ops	1 Fire Team	Daily	Medium
Mayoral Cell FOB Maintenance Iraqi Civilian/Contractor Escorts	1 Squad	Daily	High
Security / JCC (HHC – Balad)	1 Squad	Daily	High
Crater Analysis	1 Squad	As necessary	Medium
Civil-Military Operations Center (CMOC) Ops CMO (S-5/CA) ING LNOs IPS LNOs	1 Squad	Daily	High
TF Mortars	1 Platoon	Daily	High
TF TAC Personnel Security Detachment (PSD) T6 PSD: 1 x SCT SEC, HQ66 Crew T3 PSD: 2 x MTR SQD, HQ63 Crew T7 PSD	1 Platoon	Daily	High
TF M109A6 Platoon Firing PLT HQ PLT	2 Platoons	Daily	High

10 PLATOONS ON HAND — 23 PLATOONS REQUIRED

*Annotate requirement in terms of a 24-hour period of time

Figure 1

During operations in Iraq, it is also critical that all of a task force's elements perform reconnaissance. Operation Iraqi Freedom has accelerated the transition of the concept of the battlespace in replacing the concept of the battlefield. The COE produces critical requirements that demand commanders know their battlespace. The concept of battlespace requires commanders to navigate under limited visibility conditions, to move rapidly over great distances and synchronize their movement and communicate both vertically and horizontally. In this brief review of required capabilities, the experiences in Iraq demand an internal capability to perform dismounted operations and extensive reconnaissance.

Mission

The Steel Tigers' mission presented a nontraditional role for an armor battalion. Route clearance, counter-mortar/IED patrols, reconnaissance and surveillance, traffic control points, and raids constituted the bulk of operations. Everyday missions remained small in scale, notably by paired-down platoons. The Steel Tigers' mission set included: route clearance; counter-mortar patrols; observation posts; traffic control points; quick reaction force (QRF) for Logistics Support Area (LSA) Anaconda; civil affairs, psychological operations (PSYOPS) and human intelligence (HUMINT) escorts; TF indirect fires; explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) escort; forward operating base (FOB) protection; named areas of interest (NAI) overwatch; counter-IED patrols; react to indirect fire; convoy security; QRF for FOB Paliwoda; spheres of influence engagements; TF tactical command post (TAC); detainee transfers; and FOB mayor requirements.

As shown in Figure 1, TF 1-77 Armor required 23 platoons to meet mission requirements. However, the current TF task organization only afforded 10 platoons, as shown in Figure 2.

The Steel Tigers' combat power was a mixture of armor (M1A1), motorized tank platoons (M1114), mechanized infantry (M2A2), light infantry (M1114), engineers (M113), and field artillery (M109A6). Specific mission requirements also required the additional task organization of civil affairs, tactical PSYOPs teams (TPT), tactical HUMINT teams (THT), and aviation assets (AH-64/OH-58). In sum, the task organization of TF 1-77 Armor created severe tactical problems, which were outside the Legacy Force structure.

Task Organization

FOB PALIWODA

B/1-77 AR (REGULATOR)	
2/C/9 EN (RED)	(3 M113, 1 M1114)
2/C/1-18 IN (WHITE)	(4 M1114)
3/D/2-108 IN (BLUE)	(4 M1114)
HQ/B/1-77 (BLACK)	(2 M1A1)
C/1-26 IN (ROCK)	
1/C/1-26 IN (RED)	(4 M2A2)
3/C/1-26 IN (BLUE)	(4 M2A2)
1/C/1-77 AR (GREEN)	(4 M1114)
HQ 1-77 AR (TIGER)	(2 M1A1)
MTR/1-77 AR (THUNDER)	(4 M1025/26)
1/B/1-7 FA (BULL)	(3 M109A6)
S3 PSD	(4 M1114)
CDR PSD	(4 M1114)
TAC	

LSA ANACONDA

C/1-77 AR (PAIN)	
3/C/1-77 AR (BLUE)	(4 M1114)
2/C/1-26 IN (RED)	(4 M2A2)
HQ/C/1-77 (BLACK)	(2 M1A1)
HHC 1-77 AR (HELLCAT)	
SCTS/1-77 AR (SABER)	(8 M1025/26)
1/B/2-108 (HAMMER)	(4 M1114)
FIELD TRAINS	
TOC	

Figure 2

Team Pain — C Company, 1-77 Armor

At task organization, Team Pain deployed with two motorized tank platoons of four M1114s each and one mechanized platoon of four M2A2s. Following the initial deployment, the division deployed two additional companies of M1A1s of which Team Pain received two platoons. One of Team Pain's tank platoons would subsequently be task organized elsewhere in support of the brigade combat team (BCT). Therefore, Team Pain's final task organization was a mechanized infantry platoon of four M2A2s and two M1114s (Red), a tank platoon of two M1A1s and four M1114s (Blue), and a headquarters platoon of two M1114s, two up-armored M998s, and two M113s (Black). To increase the manning capabilities of Blue, Pain 6 attached an infantry fire team from Red.

Some examples of common missions and how Team Pain's platoon of action (POA) was organized are shown in Figure 3.

Team Pain's M1A1s initially were used for armored protection during their Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa clearing mission. The M1A1's superior optics and armament made it ideal for scouring the road for suspicious activity or objects. Additionally, the added armor protection was a valued deterrent against the enemy; not too many AIF are willing to taunt a 120-mm gun. The deterrent value of the M1A1 also allowed a patrol to slow its movement through dense IED locations, thus clearing the routes properly while minimizing risk. Team Pain's M1s were also very effective at traffic control points to demonstrate an overwhelming presence. The thermal sights were great for standoff against AIF, who often used the wood line to conduct ambushes.

Distinct tactical problems arose with Team Pain's tank platoon. Primarily, tank platoons, given their modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE), do not have the equipment to perform dismounted missions, even with M1114s. The MTOE authorizes a tank platoon eight rifles, no M203s, no manpack radios, and no crew-served weapons. Through the initiative of several company armorers and executive officers, the task force converted several of its M240s into improvised M240Bs, and leader vehicles were stripped of their second radios that were used as manpacks for dismounted operations.

To satisfy requirements of dismounted operations, Team Pain placed challenges on its mounted elements. Dismounting M240s reduced the mounted elements' overwatch firepower. Stripping radios reduced leaders' dual net capability. Moreover, Pain 6 realized that initially, his tank platoon leaders were at a disadvantage because they now had to maneuver both a mounted and dismounted element. However, the POA had several benefits: each platoon could conduct multiple missions, which gave the company greater flexibility; platoons were not forced to concentrate on one specific operation based on weapons platforms; platoons could maneuver on a variety of terrain; platoon leaders could task organize at the platoon level for varied mission requirements; the POA

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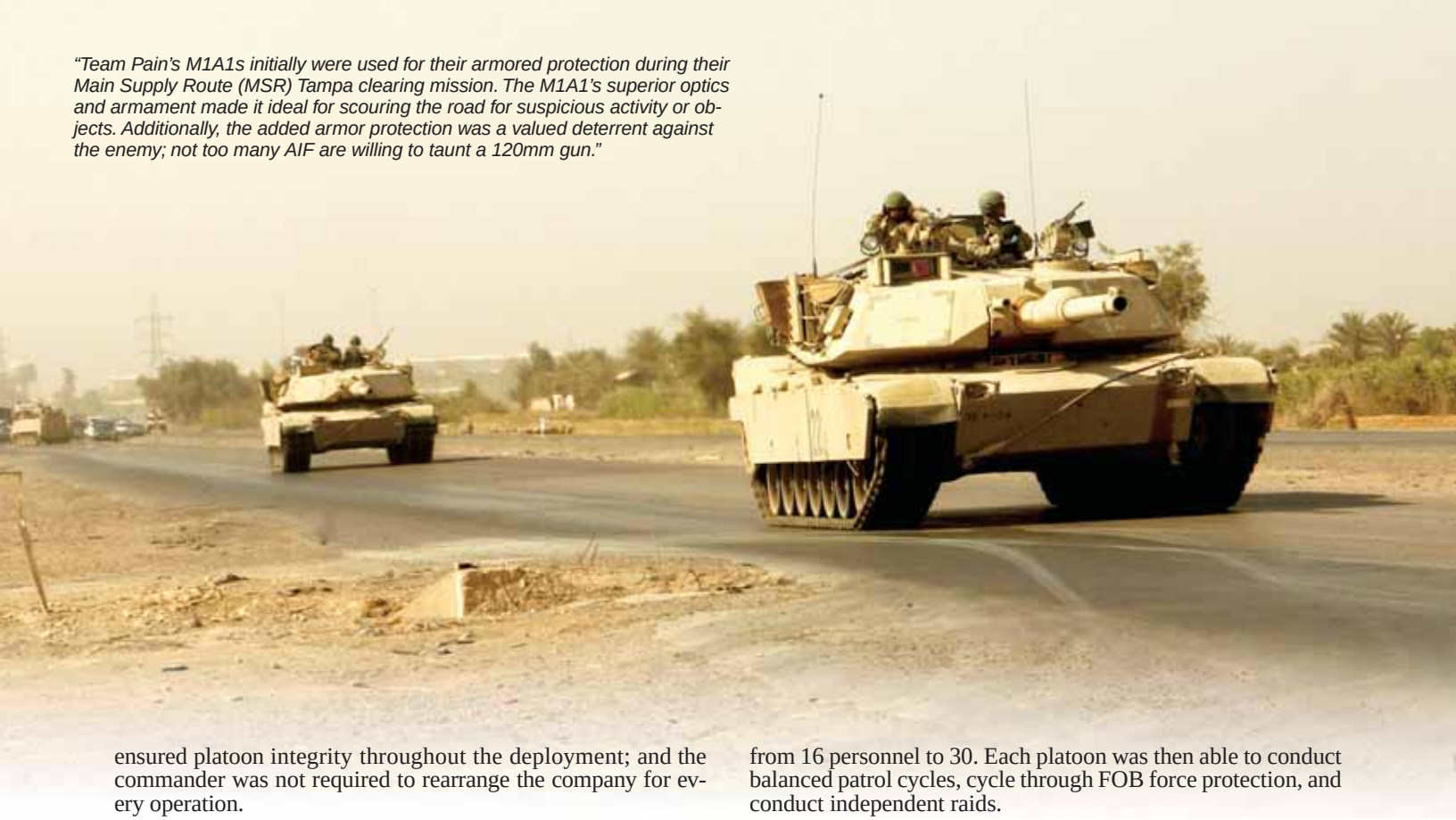

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ensured platoon integrity throughout the deployment; and the commander was not required to rearrange the company for every operation.

Team Rock — C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th (1-26) Infantry

One of the more innovative solutions to the challenges of task organization belonged to Team Rock. As the deployment was viewed as a marathon and not a sprint, Rock 6 did not believe that the standard 16-man tank platoon could withstand exhaustive patrol cycles, support FOB force protection requirements, or conduct independent raids.[5]

Therefore, to create parity within the task organization, Rock 6 detached one M2A2 and one fire team from each of his organic M2A2 platoons and attached them to his motorized armor platoon (M1114). In turn, he detached an M1114 and its assigned tank crew to each of his organic M2A2 platoons. This increased the personnel strength of his motorized armor platoon from 16 personnel to 30. Each platoon was then able to conduct balanced patrol cycles, cycle through FOB force protection, and conduct independent raids.

Team Rock took this integration a step further by implementing an M2A2 Bradley certification program for his 19-series soldiers. Through an intensive train-up, Team Rock executed a modified Bradley Table VIII to certify tankers as M2A2 drivers, gunners, and Bradley commanders. The motorized armor platoon leader, equipped with cross-trained soldiers, could then accommodate the company's mission set.

A highlight for armor leaders is the new skill set developed by the armor platoon leader. Trained at Fort Knox, Kentucky, to command a tank platoon, these lieutenants are now proficient at integrating mounted and dismounted tactics in reconnaissance, raids, and convoy security. The POA platoon leader has a deeper appreciation for full-spectrum operations. He was also given the challenge of leading twice the number of soldiers than a tank platoon.

Mission	POA Organization
Route Clearance	4 x M1114 (BLUE or BLACK)
	2 x M2A2 and 2 x M1114 (RED)
	2 x M1A1 and 2 x M1114 (BLUE)
Reconnaissance and Surveillance (Terrain Dependant)	Open Desert or Agricultural Fields 4 x M2A2 (RED); 2 x M2A2 and 2 x M1114 (RED); or 2 x M1A1 and 2 x M1114 (BLUE)
	MSR and ASRs 2 x M1A1 and 2 x M1114 2 x M2A2 and 2 x M1114
	Urban Terrain 4 x M1114 (BLUE) 2 x M1114 (RED) and 2 x M1114 (BLACK)
Convoy Escort	4 x M1114 (BLUE)
	2 x M1114 (RED) and 2 x M1114 (BLACK)
Cordon and Knock (One to Two Houses)	4 x M1114 (BLUE)
	2 x M2A2 and 2 x M1114 (RED)
	2 x M1A1 and 2 x M1114 (BLUE)

Figure 3. TEAM PAIN: Missions vs. POA Organization

The mixture of vehicles in the Team Rock POA highlights the advantages of each weapons system. Initially, Team Rock conducted route clearance of Highway 1 with a full M2A2 Bradley platoon. The intensive maintenance requirements of such employment were a serious maintenance and service burden on the M2A2s. Deploying a platoon of two M2A2s and two M1114s on route clearance reduced the overall company M2A2 mileage, minimizing the wear and tear on a high-tempo weapons system.

The M2A2 is best suited for operations in Iraq, offering firepower, maneuverability/agility, crew protection, and a dismounted infantry-carrying capacity. However, its shortcoming for not accommodating for the high mileage in the route clearance of MSR Tampa (Highway 1) was complemented by a section of M1114s. The M1114 enabled the POA platoon leader the ability to maneuver in restrictive urban terrain and continued to provide crew protection. Moreover, Team Rock integrated the company's M113s, giving the POA platoon leader the freedom of maneuver that lighter personnel carriers offer for bridge crossings. The M113 offers the maneuverability/

agility and troop-carrying capacity of the M2A2 with a decreased height and width profile required in urban operations.

Team Regulator — B Company, 1-77 Armor

Team Regulator conducted a relief in place with a fully manned M2A2 Bradley company from 3d BCT, 4th Infantry Division. The terrain of Team Regulator's new sector demanded the extensive use of dismounts (to which its predecessor had adequate access) to clear orchards, buildings, and to man observation posts. Therefore, the dismount requirement dictated the vehicle set of Team Regulator's platoons.

For Team Regulator, the POA changes occurred during task organization. Team Regulator lost her three organic M1A1 tank platoons to support the BCT.[6] Team Regulator would receive an engineer platoon of three M113s, one M998, and one M1114 (Red), a motorized infantry platoon of five M1114s (White), and a light infantry anti-tank platoon of four M1114s (Blue). The headquarters platoon of two M1A1s, two M998s, and two M113s would remain and be supplemented with two M1114s.

One of Team Regulator's enduring challenges was a sector of distinctly varied terrain — the urban streets of Balad. This Shi'a enclave of 75,000 is set along the Tigris River. Manmade structures of walls, canals, and dikes, and thick vegetation of orchards, foliage, and agriculture fields limited their maneuver space. Operations in urban Balad were decentralized and avenues of approach limited the use of Team Regulator's M1A1s. Compounding maneuver limitations was the transition from the urban alleys and streets of Balad, to the jungle-like terrain paralleling the Tigris, to the expanse of arid land along side of MSR Tampa.

To increase White's dismounted infantry-carrying capabilities, the company modified its two ambulance M113s into troop carriers and added company headquarters' and maintenance M113s into the patrol cycle.[7] Green carried with the same constraints as discussed above with the motorized tank platoon; therefore, Regulator 6 regularly supplemented Green platoon with M113, M1114, or M1A1s from headquarters platoon. Red alone operated within its normal platoon capabilities.

Due to the varying vehicle capabilities and soldier skill sets, each platoon had regular patrol requirements. Red, with its inherent EOD capability, primarily conducted counter-IED patrols and route clearance. White, with its dismount capabilities, focused on NAI overwatch to maximize the use of dismounted observation posts. Finally, Green, supplemented with either the headquarters tank section or M113s, conducted route clearance of the MSR and alternate supply routes (ASRs).

In reflection of the use of his headquarters tank section, Regulator 6 relied on the M1A1 to provide lethal direct fire overwatch, thermal optic capability, and act as a show of force. The restrictive terrain of Team Regulator's sector and the exhaustive requirement for dismounts limited his tank section to lethal direct fire in larger company raids or TF missions (movement to contact).

Tiger TAC — B Battery, 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery

The addition of an M109A6 Paladin platoon to the task force allowed the TF commander to use the TF mortar platoon (Thunder) as an additional motorized infantry platoon. Attaching a mortar section to the TAC was originally planned to offer indi-

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rect fires capability to the TAC while in sector. However, the limitations of Thunder's M1064s, most notably speed, forced the increased use of M1114s and up-armored M998s. Moreover, the risk inherent of rolling a section of M1064s loaded with their high explosive basic load in a sector of IEDs, mines, and rocket-propelled grenades reduced their deployment in sector.

Therefore, to increase the number of TF platoons, Thunder was required to revert back to its infantry roots. With its MTOE M998s given add-on armor and the addition of two M1114s, Thunder took on missions, such as convoy escort, crater analysis, traffic control points, counter-IED/counter-mortar patrols, reconnaissance, QRF, and TAC personal security detachment. Moreover, Thunder provided two sections of mortars and its fire direction center (FDC) to support the TF fires mission.

The greatest challenge to Thunder 6 was to manage the troops-to-task issue. Over a 24-hour period, the mortar platoon provided a gun crew for indirect fires, fire direction control/platoon command post operations, QRF, FOB force protection, and personal security detachment for the TAC. To effectively manage his platoon and to keep his soldiers' skills sharp, Thunder 6 rotated his personnel through duties. Due to the troops-to-task, the TAC, for the most part, had to remain mounted.

In review of operations in Iraq, Thunder 6 recalls his soldiers definitely spent more time behind their M4s than behind their 120mm mortar tubes. He attributes their success here in Iraq to the mission focused training program conducted prior to deployment; it allowed the platoon to refine already present infantry skill sets.

Task Force 1-77 Armor's task was to shape her warfighting capabilities to changing circumstances. The old warfighting paradigm, which focused primarily on the military capabilities of a small set of potential adversary states, no longer addressed the entire threat spectrum. In this COE, traditional concepts of mass, speed, firepower, and maneuver were inadequate. The TF adapted in response to these new conditions just as our enemies pursued new ways to diminish our overwhelming power, as experienced AIF seldom presented a target set that an M1A1 tank platoon could fully exploit to influence the tactical fight. The tank platoon was designed for a different war on different terrain. Retired Israeli army General Yehuda Admon said of the use of Israeli armor in the urban fight, "This is not a normal way of using the tank for a low-intensive conflict. If we had something else to use, we would use it. Tanks are for mass fights."[8] The tank continues to make a presence on the urban battlefields of Iraq.

AIF tactics, coupled with its task organization, created severe tactical problems, which were outside the Legacy Force structure. As tactical innovation occurs only where tactical innovation is required, four different commanders of TF 1-77 Armor applied innovation to distinct tactical problems. Where tactical innovation was not required, the commanders stayed with the tried-and-true applications of the armor platoon. In sum, the tactical problems spawned a tank platoon fighting split section with two M1A1s and two M1114s; a tank platoon fighting cross-trained as M2A2 Bradley crewman fought split section with two M2A2s and two M1114s; a headquarters tank section cross-attached with a light infantry anti-tank platoon forming a platoon of two M1A1s and two M1114s, or two M113s and two M1114s; and the creation of two additional platoons to resolve the TF troops-to-task of two headquarters tanks, a scout section, and two mortar squads operating in M1114s.

The POA, in reflection, allowed the platoons to break down into combat effective sections that could both move over narrow ground, yet maintain lethal standoff with an effective weapons system (either the M2A2's 25mm or the M1A1's 120mm). Setting the heavy tracks stationary, the lighter vehicle could maneuver under the watchful cover of the upgraded sights on both the M1A1 and M2A2. Bottom line: the POA provided commanders flexibility to accomplish mission sets.

The leaders of the POA faced varied challenges outside of those presented by the enemy. The POA platoon leader faced the challenge of knowing and understanding mounted and dismounted operations and the employment of his equipment to suit each operation. For the armor POA platoon leaders, they were forced to operate without M1A1s and introduced to M2A2s, M113s, and M1114s. Thus, tank crews must heavily train on their new equipment to be proficient.

No system to date has risen to become a war winner. However, innovative commanders routinely win battles by employing highly skilled soldiers in nontraditional formations. Reflecting on the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, General William E. DePuy noted that the Israeli tank crews (often using the same equipment their opponents used) were between three to six times more effective, "during the next 10 years, battlefield outcome will depend upon the quality of the troops rather than the quality of the tanks."[9] True to form, the gauntlet was thrown, and the soldiers and commanders of TF Steel Tigers answered the call to arms.

Notes

[1]Major General Rober H. Scales, Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives, Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., 21 October 2003.

[2]Speech by General Peter J. Schoomaker, Chief of Staff, Army, at the annual Association of the U.S. Army Convention, Washington, D.C., October 2003.

[3]Colonel Bruce B.G. Clarke, "The Stryker Company and the Multifunctional Cavalry Platoon," *ARMOR*, July-August 2004, pp. 24-28.

[4]During the task force deployment, designation of enemy forces morphed from insurgents to anti-coalition forces to anti-Iraqi forces, signifying shifts in authority from coalition forces to the interim Iraqi government.

[5]The current operating environment often required the TF's platoon to transition from their preplanned missions of reconnaissance and surveillance into hasty raids. The standard "motorized" tank platoon cannot support both a mounted security element and a dismounted assault element as required of urban operations.

[6]The 2d Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division originally deployed with one M1A1 tank company, which was parceled across six task forces. The division would later deploy two additional tank companies of which TF 1-77 Armor would ultimately receive a platoon.

[7]Modifying the medic M113s included painting over the red crosses or using "flip-style" red-cross designations that could be lifted up or down to display or not display the crosses. Brigade and division legal advisors confirmed that all modifications were compliant with the Law of Land Warfare.

[8]John Brosky, "Tank Still Has Role, But Future Uncertain." *Defense News*, 24 June 2002, p. 6.

[9]Richard Swain, ed., *Selected Papers of General William E. DePuy*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1994, p. 71.

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